

Sri Lankan riot police attack Colombo port workers

Our reporters
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Sri Lankan riot police last Wednesday attacked a protest march of about 1,000 Colombo port workers opposed to the government's plan to privatise the East Terminal of Colombo harbour.

The police erected steel barricades to prevent protestors marching towards the Presidential Secretariat. The opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and its trade unions, which organized the march, had planned to hand over a petition requesting President Maithripala Sirisena to intervene and halt the privatisation of the port terminal.

After police blocked the march, the Presidential Secretariat promised to send someone to collect the petition. As there was no sign of an official arriving after 40 minutes, some workers tried to break through the barricades. Immediately police used water cannon and tear gas against the protesters. A number received minor injuries and hundreds fled the scene.

This is the second time that police have violently attacked demonstrators in Colombo. On February 2, police used tear gas and water cannon against medical students protesting against the establishment of private medical colleges. Scores were arrested.

Many port workers told the WSWs reporting team that there is widespread opposition to the planned privatisation. However, the JVP and its unions organised the demonstration to deflect this opposition into the dead-end of pressuring the government and to exploit the anger to boost the flagging base of the JVP.

After the demonstration was dispersed by police, JVP leader and parliamentarian Sunil Handunnetthi told workers: "We came to request the president [Sirisena] to halt the privatisation. By not allowing us it has been proved that Sirisena also supports the selling of national assets like [prime minister Ranil] Wickremesinghe and [minister] Malik [Samarawickrama]."

Privatisation of Colombo Harbour began long ago. The

Queen Elizabeth Quay was privatised in 1999 under the government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga and is now run by the South Asia Gateway Terminal (SAGT) company. Under President Mahinda Rajapakse, the Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT) was privatized in 2013 with 80 percent of the shares sold to a Chinese company. Now the Ports Authority controls only a small portion of the harbour.

The workforce has been reduced sharply as part of the restructuring of the harbour during the past two decades. Contract workers have been hired from private labour-hire companies at low wages. They do not have the rights of permanent workers but do the same work.

Every time that opposition has emerged to the privatisation of the harbour or job cuts, none of the unions, including those controlled by the JVP, have gone beyond issuing token statements or holding protests appealing to the government to reverse its decision.

The February 1 attack on Colombo port workers was not an isolated incident. It has demonstrated yet again the futility of the JVP's claim that the government can be pressured by workers. The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government is determined to sell state-owned companies to Sri Lankan and foreign investors. Regarding the East Terminal, the ports and shipping minister told parliament on January 26 that a cabinet paper has been submitted to lease 85 percent of the government stake.

This measure is part of the broader "economic reform program" that the government has promised the International Monetary Fund to implement in return for a \$US1.5 billion stand-by loan. The cash-strapped government is desperate to create the conditions for foreign investment.

Last month the government deployed naval soldiers to suppress a protest by Hambantota Magampura Port workers. The workers were demanding job protection after the government announced plans to sell 85 percent

of shares to the China Merchants Port Holding Company. Similarly, the government is continuously unleashing the police crackdown on students who campaign against education privatisation.

The JVP criticised the attack on Magampura Port workers but did not call its harbour unions to support those workers. During the Colombo Harbour protest, the JVP did not call on the 8,000 other port workers to support the struggle. The JVP fears that a unified campaign would draw in other sections of workers facing similar attacks by the government on their rights and quickly escalate out of its control.

JVP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake issued a statement on January 24 explaining that the party was planning a series of protests against the government's "destructive measures," including privatisation. He added: "Of course there are other means of stopping these acts. The people should bring in a government that would not sell people's assets."

JVP leaders have earlier declared that the party was preparing to take power in the 2020 general election. The JVP is calculating that the two main Sri Lankan capitalist parties—Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) and Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—have been thoroughly discredited.

Despite its phony socialistic demagogy, the JVP is a bourgeois party, thoroughly integrated into the Colombo establishment. If a JVP-led government came to power and kept state-owned enterprises in government hands, it would inevitably oversee the slashing of jobs, conditions and wages in the name of making them "internationally competitive."

In 2004, the JVP joined the bourgeois SLFP-led government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga. At that general election, it declared that it supported "private-public partnerships" and "advantageous" foreign investment. Its leaders joined Kumaratunga's cabinet and supported all the pro-market measures implemented by the government.

While now pretending to have clean hands, the JVP is politically responsible for bringing the Sirisena-Wickremasinghe government to power and thus its attacks on workers. It was in the forefront in the campaign to install Sirisena as president in 2015, saying that defeat of the Rajapakse dictatorship was a priority. Dissanayake entered the National Executive Council set up by Sirisena to consolidate the pro-US government.

The attacks on workers and the poor are the response of the corporate elite to the breakdown of the capitalist

system and deepening global economic crisis. Workers can only defend their rights by fighting for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies based on the social needs of the majority not the profits of a tiny few. Such a struggle to abolish capitalism is necessarily international in character.

The WSWS reporting team spoke to Colombo port workers who were keen to discuss how to oppose privatization. A naval engineering division employee said: "We are tired of protests and tired of waiting for bureaucrats and politicians to read our petitions. How can we just hand over a petition?"

Another worker added: "We voted for these people [the government] in 2015, future generations will curse us for that." He explained that privatisation is also affecting public education, health care and other essential social services.

A logistics division employee said that workers from there joined the march regardless of different union affiliations or service grades. "From engineers to unskilled labourers, all of us are here to protest," he said, adding that the government was signing agreements to privatise and keeping workers in the dark.

Another port worker pointed out that many workers have been employed by "manpower" or labour-hire companies. "They have to do the same work as the [permanent] SLPA workers but have no rights. The government uses this situation to destroy our welfare programs. If this privatization plan goes ahead, we'll lose our jobs too in the very near future."

Jude from the engineering division explained that if the Eastern Terminal is sold the Ports Authority will only have control of the shallow areas of the harbor which cannot accommodate large vessels. "This is a death warrant for the Authority and private companies will rake in all the profits from the Colombo Port," he said.



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